

THE CHAIN GANG GUARD.

The noon-tide sun of a hot summer day beat fiercely down upon the convicts at work in the apparently boundless cotton field that belonged to Col. Jefferson Clay.

It was a large plantation, and was almost entirely worked by a force of chain-gang convicts, leased to Col. Clay by the state authorities.

As the sun reached the meridian its rays came down so pitilessly, and with such scorching fervor, that the four guards who kept watch over the miserable convicts were compelled to seek shelter under the few scattered pines which dotted little knolls in different parts of the field.

Lazily reclining on the grass, the guards played with their battered old muskets, and kept a keen lookout for the slightest indication of lagging work or insubordination on the part of the eighty prisoners who were engaged in hoeing cotton.

There was little danger of the convicts escaping. A heavy ball and chain were attached to each man and it was difficult to make much headway. The guards were always vigilant, and when it was necessary they had a pack of trained bloodhounds in reserve for the pursuit and capture of fugitives.

Suddenly one of the guards looked at his watch.

"Dinner time!" he exclaimed, and raising a whistle to his lips he blew a keen blast, which was heard all over the field.

The effect was magical. Every hoe fell to the ground, and four squads of convicts were soon sitting on the shade-devolving their scanty rations of corn bread, bacon and greens. Forgetting their miseries for a time, these unfortunates revelled in the enjoyment of their rude repast.

During the progress of the meal, the guards were attracted by the peculiar conduct of a prisoner in one of the squads. Approaching him the guard said in a surly tone:

"See here, Joe, no shamming now; it won't do, you know. No sickness allowed in this camp!"

The convict looked up with a start, looked into the cruel eyes of a cruel face, and saw no mercy there.

"Curse you!" he snarled. "I wonder if you have a heart?"

"Think I have," replied the other nonchalantly, "but that has nothing to do with your case, my friend. Our worthy host, Col. Clay, is of the opinion that a convict never gets sick—he only shames."

The guard looked down into the face of the convict.

Tall and erect, youthful and handsome, making allowance for the cruel eyes and face, the guard, despite his rough jeans suit, looked like a man who had seen better days. And his history did not run counter to his appearance. Five years before Dick Macon had been one of the spoiled darlings of society. The gaming table and the wine cup had sent him down at headlong speed to his present level, had reduced him to the necessity of accepting the position of chain gang guard on Jefferson Clay's plantation.

The prisoner, whose keen black eyes were scanning the relentless face above him, was a middle-aged man, whose slight frame showed that he was ill fitted to bear the hardships of his situation. His restless eyes, haggard face, trembling hands and husky voice would have awakened pity as well as contempt in the breast of almost any observer.

There was nothing novel in the spectacle to Dick Macon, however, and bringing his musket down with a vicious thump he said:

"You'd better take care, Joe—you'll get a licking before night if you don't get about your work quicker."

Joe bowed his head and muttered:

"Twenty thousand dollars, and I was fool enough to think of giving him half. I'll hate my time."

"What's that?" asked Dick Macon quickly.

"Nothing," answered Joe, with his head still bent down.

"Joe!" said the guard.

"Well!" was the snappish response.

"I want to know, you rascal, what you mean by your allusion to \$20,000!"

"Oh, it was nothing," replied the other. "It was mere madness on my part. I meant that I would give half of the \$20,000 that I have securely hidden away if I could once get out of this blasted place."

"You lying scoundrel!" laughed the guard. "Do you think you can make me tumble to that sort of racket? You never had \$20,000 in your life."

"Liar, yourself!" shouted Joe, with a sudden flash of fire in his wild eyes.

"What an I here for, Dick Macon?"

"Humph!" said Dick, "murder, I believe."

"Correct," returned the convict. "Murder it was. I was convicted on circumstantial evidence, and owing to that fact I saved my neck, and was sent up for life. But with that murder was connected a robbery. When old Henderson was killed he had on his person money and valuable jewels amounting to a small fortune."

The guard looked at the other convicts. They were a little distance off, quarreling over their rations.

"Go on," said he.

"Did you ever hear that the plunder was found?" asked Joe, with a cunning leer.

"Don't know that I ever did," said Dick. "But still it may have been found."

"Not by a—sight!" answered Joe with great energy. "The booty is safe enough, and I could lay my hand on it in forty-eight hours if I could just get out of this cursed camp."

"What will you give for freedom?" asked Dick with a provoking grin.

"Half!" cried the prisoner. "Ten thousand dollars to the man who releases me from this infernal place and puts me beyond pursuit!" and he looked eagerly into the guard's inscrutable face.

Dick Macon whistled a lively tune, turned as if to walk off, and then wheeled abruptly about.

"Take a couple of buckets, you lazy slouch!" he shouted to the convict. "I must have some fresh water here, and we must go to the spring to get it. I say, Bill," he called to one of the other guards, "just bring your gang over here, and watch my pets while I go for some water."

Bill did as directed, and Joe, laden with two empty buckets, limped along in the direction of the spring, closely followed by Dick Macon, with his musket thrown carelessly over his arm.

The spring was about 300 yards from the other convicts and their guards, and was concealed from their view by intervening trees.

The guard and the convict remained at the spring some time, so long, in fact, that their thirsty comrades left behind began to cast wistful glances in their direction.

The loud report of a musket in the neighborhood of the spring plunged the chain gang and the guard into the greatest excitement.

What was the matter? Had Dick Macon fired upon Joe in the act of escaping? Had Joe wrested the musket from Dick and shot him? These were the questions asked among the convicts. The affair was explained in a moment.

Dick Macon made his appearance, running at full speed. He was almost breathless when he came into the gang of prisoners.

"I had to kill him," he gasped. "I was sorry enough to have to do it, but he

turned on me all of a sudden with a big stone in his hand, and if I had been a second later he would have killed me."

Some of the prisoners murmured at this statement, but the ominous "click" of the muskets quieted them, and after a brief consultation a trusty scout was dispatched to the house to inform Col. Clay of the occurrence.

The wealthy convict lessee swore roundly at first, but after a little reflection he said:

"By jove! I'm glad the fellow's gone. He was a heap of trouble—a powerful sight of trouble—couldn't do a fair day's work, and always stirring the other men, and making—was the best thing that could have happened."

The trusty returned to the field bearing from Col. Clay the laconic message, "It's all right," and the work of the day went on as usual.

When the prisoners knocked off work at sundown they were marched to the stockade, in which they were always pent up at night, and two men were sent out with a guard to bury the dead man.

No coroner's inquest was held. It was not likely that anybody would raise a stir over so trifling an event as the shooting of a chain-gang malefactor. A grave was hastily dug near the place where the body lay, and the carcass was dumped into a hole and covered over with dirt.

In a week the affair was forgotten. Matters at the camp moved on as usual, with the exception of the illness of Dick Macon. This young man fell ill without any warning, and after a few days' rest, signed his position, saying that he would have to seek some lighter employment.

The great convict lessee swore at Dick, but finally parted with him in a tolerably good humor. The thought never crossed his mind that the shooting of Joe had anything to do with the illness of the guard and his desire for a change of scene and occupation.

So Dick Macon drew what wages were due him and flitted away one morning, whither no one knew or cared to know.

The season at Bagatelle Springs was at its height. Visitors who had not missed a season for twenty years declared with contagious enthusiasm that Bagatelle had never appeared to better advantage. The hotel was filled with guests, and the cottages were well patronized. Fairer women and braver men were never assembled together to trifle away the days and engage in midnight revels.

The gayest of all the gay and high-spirited gallants who the acknowledged lady-killers of Bagatelle was unquestionably Mr. Richard Macon.

This young man was a riddle to the few students of human nature who occasionally made him a special study. Young, handsome, possessed of abundant means and regarded with undisguised favor by more than one of the reigning belles, there appeared to be every reason why young Macon should be a thoroughly happy man.

That he was not happy in spite of his bright sallies, was plain to all who cared to see. The days passed, and Macon was engaged in a continuous round of pleasure. Athletic and proficient in every manly sport and pastime from a rowing match to a game of croquet, it was not surprising that his time should be fully occupied.

Nobody knew anything against Mr. Richard Macon, and yet there was a feeling of unpleasant surprise in the gay circle at Bagatelle when it was known that the young man had won the heart and the prettiest little blonde beauty at the springs. Still it was difficult to give a reason for this. Miss Murray was an heiress, the only child of a widowed mother who had come to Bagatelle in reality for her health, and not to set her cap for a second husband. But Macon was a handsome, generous fellow, a little moody and queer at times, but in the main genial and clever, and better than all, the owner of certain mining stocks which paid him fabulous dividends. His antecedents were not known, but he claimed kinship with highly respectable families well known to the social world, and no one questioned his story.

It was the last night of Irene Murray's stay at Bagatelle. On the morrow she and her mother were to return home. The two lovers had much to say to each other, and they preferred to say it away from the glare of the ballroom, and away from the sounds of flying feet and the watering place band.

As they promenaded on the spacious piazza of the hotel, Irene said, as her loving eyes rested upon the handsome face of her escort:

"Now, Richard, dear, you will follow us soon?"

"In ten days at farthest, my darling," answered Richard. "I am waiting for a business letter which may call me to New York, but even in that case my stay will be short, and you will see me before you have begun to miss me."

"Richard," said the fair girl with a tinge of melancholy in her tone, "there is only one thing needed to make me perfectly happy."

"Hail!" laughed Richard, "you would have the old lady view me with more favorable eyes."

"That is just it," was the earnest answer. "Mamma is all I have left and I do desire to please her, and yet her prejudices are so tenacious, that they are leveled at me," said Richard; "but never mind, dear, her prejudices will vanish when she sees how devoted I am to you, and how we love each other."

"I hope so," Irene replied, seriously and with a tremor of her rosebud mouth.

"Of course they will," answered the lover, cheerily. "No prejudice will be proof against such love as mine!"

The two continued their promenade, but finally paused where the light from the ballroom windows fell upon them.

"I have a little present for you," said Richard Macon, with a strange, intense ring in his voice. "It is an heirloom in our family and has been for a couple of centuries, I suppose; I have always kept it concealed from profane eyes, with the intention of giving it to my promised wife."

The girl's face grew radiant as she raised her eyes with an expectant look.

Clumsily and with singular awkwardness for one so graceful and self-possessed, Richard drew from his breast pocket a jewel case. Silently opening it, he exposed to the astonished vision of the beautiful girl a quaint and rare necklace of glittering diamonds in just such an antique setting as would have delighted a Florentine jeweler in the middle ages.

"Richard!" the cry escaped from Irene's lips in an agonized tone, as she grasped the necklace and held it to the light.

"Isn't it pretty?" said Richard, with an injured look.

"Oh, merciful heavens!" exclaimed Irene. "Can't I be mistaken? No, it is too evident—how did you come by this necklace, Richard? Did you say it was an heirloom in your family?"

"What a racket!" said Richard, turning pale and speaking very rapidly. "Yes, it is an ancient heirloom in our family—my great-grandfather used to wear it; it has never been out of the family since it was purchased by an ancestor of mine, in Paris, I think."

Irene gave another searching glance at the necklace, and then clutched it tightly in her hand.

"Richard Macon," she said, in calm, clear tones, "this was never an heirloom in your family."

"What can you mean—you are beside yourself!" gasped Richard.

"I mean," returned Irene, with a piercing glance, "that this necklace is one of the articles my poor murdered father had with him when he was killed and robbed in Georgia four years ago."

"Behave!" cried Richard. "It may resemble it, but of course it cannot be the same. Don't I know that it has always been in my family? You are losing your senses, Irene."

"I am not mistaken," was the agitated reply. "I have handled this necklace too often to be mistaken. Why, here, the private mark placed there by my father one day in my presence. I will recollect that he said at the time that the mark might some day aid in identifying the necklace if it should ever be lost. It is the same, and now, Richard Macon, how came you by this precious heirloom?"

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When morning came, just as the gray light was chasing the darkness away, a pistol shot rang through the hotel. There was a rushing to and fro, and finally a crowd of servants and boarders stood in Richard Macon's room, gazing upon the dead body of the suicide as it lay stretched upon the bed, with a pistol firmly grasped in the right hand.

Richard Macon had taken his own life. It was not the fear of the law that impelled him to this rash step—he felt able to hold his own against the world. But he knew that no deceit, however artful, ray, and death was a thousand times preferable to life with the ever present sense of her loathing and confident suspicion of his guilt.

The miserably man left a sealed letter for Irene Murray. In it was a true recital of the facts of the case. The proposition of the convict Joe was stated, and the writer told how he yielded to temptation—how he induced the prisoner, by promising him freedom, to disclose the hiding place of Henderson's money and jewels, and how, when he had ascertained that, he had treacherously and coolly shot the convict down like a dog, and afterward made use of the scoundrel's hidden plunder. The letter was written with deliberate coolness, but at the close the writer expressed his undying affection for Irene, and begged her to forgive his madness, folly and guilt.

The butterflies of the social world at Bagatelle could not fathom the mystery of Macon's suicide. They did not know the contents of his letter to Irene, and it was not until Irene was happily married, a couple of years later, that any one knew it. She told her husband all about it one day, and he, for an answer, merely folded her in his arms and kissed her.—Wallace P. Reed in Atlanta Constitution.

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